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Osceola Refetoff: Beauty and Awe of the California Desert

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Osceola Refetoff is a Los Angeles-based photographer. A Chicago native with Danish, Bulgarian and Canadian roots, Osceola is a master filmmaker and photographer. Osceola's first love was film making which he studied at Duke University and then at New York University's Graduate Film Program. Over time, Osceola's talent for visual storytelling gravitated towards photography. His works reflect his passion for humanity and its impact it has on the world. These days Osceola's focus is on the vast American West, including the magnificent California desert and the communities who used to inhabit there. In collaboration with historian Christopher Langley, Osceola created "High & Dry," a wonderful blog of stories and images that detail the stark landscape and communities in the California desert. His works from his vast desert series are on exhibit at the Porch Gallery in Ojai through the end of March. This week Osceola talks to atlas about his start in photography, why the California desert appeals to him, and why it is important to document the natural beauty and stories of desert life.



How did you first get into photography?

I do not have one of those heart-warming stories where I got a camera at age five and knew I wanted to be a photographer. Mostly as a kid, I was into blowing things up and generally causing trouble. It was not until much later – in my twenties – that I got interested in photography, and even then there was not a sudden “ah ha!” moment. At some point, I was living in New York City and found myself carrying around a couple of small cameras at all times — one with color film and one with black & white.

You brilliantly capture a wide range of images — people, landscape, nature, objects — that show all aspects of our humanity. What is it about our humanity that draws you in as a photographer?

I am fascinated by people and I enjoy observing and revealing their personalities, usually with their permission and at their best. However, much of my desert work is about the absence of people. Not straight-up nature shots, but humanity defined by the traces they leave behind. I am particularly interested in what desert ruins might have to say about who we are today as a society, and how that may be different from peoples of the past.



If you look at Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, it seems like everyone is posting photos and identifying themselves as a photographer. How do you create images that sets yours apart from all the rest?

I am active on social media. I love being able to connect with a larger audience, far away. And although I do a lot of work that is experimental in nature – pinhole photography, infrared photography, long exposures – my general approach to photography is pretty traditional. To stand out in this crazy-cluttered environment, you simply have to shoot really well. For instance, I have a series “Armchair in the Sky” that I capture from the windows of commercial airplanes. When I started photographing the series on film twenty years ago, you did not see those kind of images very often. Now, everyone is shooting out airplane windows with their phones. If I want my images to stand out against the millions of airplane shots that are posted online, they better be really very good. So far I must have made a couple thousand exposures. After twenty years, I finally started exhibiting the series last July, and to date I have uploaded about twenty images to my website. So start with a specific vision, pursue that vision over the long haul, edit the results with ruthless determination, and print only the very best with a mindful, cohesive aesthetic. Personally, I like that there are so many “photographers” out there today. It keeps me on my game.

Tell us a bit more about these stunning and beautiful desert images you have entitled “Ozymandias.” You have a masterful eye for light and style. What inspired you to capture these desert images?

“[Ozymandias](#)” is the name of one of my black & white desert portfolios featuring the remnants of human existence strewn about in the California desert. I generally carry at least two or three cameras with me when I travel by car in the desert. Some images lend themselves to black & white exposures, and for these, I generally shoot infrared – either digital or film. The main reason for working in b&w is that, in the absence of color, all the emphasis is on form and composition. As an additional benefit, infrared makes the skies very dark, and the clouds (when there are clouds) are very pronounced. Generally, landscape photographers have a hard time making good images in the middle of the day, so they tend to favor “magic hour” light and shadow. Well, that leaves a lot of day on the table! I love “good” light too, but for me, the desert experience is much about the sun directly overhead. Black & white photography not only feels like the right medium to portray many of my subjects, but it also allows me to work all day long, capturing the relentless intensity of the midday desert sun.



Your passion about the desert led you to start a blog called “High & Dry” about California’s deserts and those who reside there. What inspired you to start this blog? What do you hope to accomplish with this blog?

I had been thinking for some time about collaborating with a writer because of the unique power that words and images have when they are presented in tandem. I was familiar with the work of James Agee/Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange/Paul Taylor when I met writer/historian Christopher Langley in Lone Pine, CA while working on a motion picture project. First and foremost, the purpose of our collaboration is to present cool and interesting stories about the California desert, illustrated with quality photographs. We are interested in the history of the desert, particularly in relation to human activity past and present. We are also documenting the massive transformation underway with the development of industrial-scale renewable energy facilities. Our hope is that familiarizing people with the history and natural beauty of the desert will encourage them to consider the future of this long-undervalued land resource. The project gets re-syndicated in a variety of media – local desert publications, glossy magazines, scholarly journals, and KCET’s “Artbound” – so we are able to reach a large audience from all walks of life.



You chose to photograph these images in black & white which gives them a radiant aesthetic quality. Why did you select black & white over color?

I love both color and black & white. Some subjects are suitable to both mediums, but others are distinctly better in either color or b&w. Because I shoot 99% of my b&w work in infrared, I have to make my decision on site, determining by the nature of the subject, which representation better suits what I want to express. In the desert, I usually photograph from a tripod, so sometimes I will make a similar exposure with both a color and a b&w camera.



Are there any photographers who have influenced you?

I came to photography later in life. Early on I was much more interested in filmmaking, eventually getting an MFA in film production from NYU. All through my late teens and twenties, when I was not in production, I would see ten or more features a week in theater. So my compositional style and my interest in visual narrative was heavily influenced by the great mis-en-scene directors I admire – Lange, Welles, Kubrick, Melville, etc. So today, I find myself interested in the meticulous framing of

compositions in depth, I like to explore temporal as well as visual space in my stills, and I am obsessed with creating visual effects in-camera. I go to art presentations of all kinds – many of them! And I find that I'm as likely to be inspired by a painter or the lighting design of a stage production than I am by a photography exhibit.

If you could go on a photo shoot with any photographer (living or deceased), who would it be?

I only became interested in photography very late in the game long after I had developed what I consider my own visual style. I think I would enjoy hanging out with Man Ray or perhaps a late night out on the town with Brassai.

If you could give one piece of advice for a novice photographer, what would it be?

I would tell him or her to buy a printer. The images we see on backlit displays have significant limitations. They cannot adequately convey the full artistic potential of photography at its best. I have seen too many images on my computer that translate to disappointing prints. And images "in the ether" favor graphic, hit-you-over-the-head compositions, rather than subtle, more nuanced work. Printing your work will help you understand how to make better exposures, and seeing the photographs as physical documents will, over time, help you evaluate which of your images may truly be excellent, and which will only get a bunch of likes on Instagram. You will know you are getting somewhere when your prints starting looking much better than your images on the screen. For a while, you may find that the opposite is true. Keep at it. For me at least, printing is hard work. I do not do fancy stuff, mostly traditional darkroom adjustments, not what comes to mind when people typically think of "photoshop." But I have only had time to print a small percentage of the images on my website, which are the ones I have exhibited. These images look far better than they did before I spent a couple of days working on them, experimenting with different papers, exposures, color balance, etc. As Ansel Adams said, "The negative is the equivalent of the composer's score, and the print the performance."

Thanks for being our photographer of the week, Osceola!

For more information about Osceola, visit his [website](#). For more information about "High & Dry," visit his [blog](#). For more information about Osceola's current photography exhibit at Porch Gallery, visit the gallery's [website](#).